

THE SACRAMENTO BEE

How climate change came to shape Jerry Brown's legacy

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LE BOURGET, FRANCE – On the last weekend in May, Gov. Jerry Brown traveled to a cabin on the Russian River to help spread the cremains of Peter Finnegan, one of his oldest friends.

Brown had turned 77 the previous month and, after a lifetime in politics, was in the dusk of his career.

On a hill overlooking the river, the Rev. John Coleman, a San Francisco priest and mutual friend, asked Brown what he hoped to accomplish in his final term.

Colman said that “without any hesitation,” Brown replied that nothing mattered more to him than climate change.

The remark was a reminder of how much stock Brown has put in climate policy at the beginning of his fourth term – and how significant the issue has become to the legacy of California's longest-serving governor.

In January, Brown proposed a dramatic expansion of California's greenhouse gas reduction policies. And in the run-up to international climate talks underway in a suburb north of Paris – a gathering of heads of state, not governors – Brown fashioned a role for himself as a diplomat.

He has called the summit “the crucial event for the future of the world,” and he recruited officials from dozens of other states and sub-national governments to press world leaders on the issue.

“He knows this is his last hurrah,” Coleman said. “He wants to do the best he can with it.”

Yet as Brown arrived in France on Saturday, it was unclear how much of a difference his efforts might make. The United Nations' last attempt to reach a climate deal failed in Copenhagen in 2009. And despite generally uplifting talks over the past several days, sharp disagreements remain, including about how wealthy nations should help poorer ones adapt to effects of climate change. Resistance from a Republican-controlled Congress in the United States has rendered the meeting unlikely to result in a legally binding treaty.

Organizers of the conference, in an effort to manage expectations, have framed the summit as a turning point, emphasizing the possibility of an agreement on strict emissions reporting standards and regular

reviews of nations' goals. A pact could still commit nearly every country around the world to policies to reduce emissions. Christiana Figueres, the United Nations' climate chief, called voluntary pledges by 146 countries a "testament to unprecedented commitment" to counteract the effects of global warming.

But the U.N. acknowledged that these pledges are not sufficient to limit the increase in average annual global temperatures to below 2 degrees Celsius, a threshold beyond which many scientists predict major environmental disruptions.

Already in California, rising temperatures have exacerbated effects of a four-year drought. Spring comes earlier in the Sierras and wildfires rage.

Looking at their own data, some climate scientists report suffering symptoms commonly associated with post-traumatic stress disorder. Stanford University biologist Paul Ehrlich, asked by *In These Times* magazine how he coped, chuckled and said, "I drink a lot."

Brown is moderately more optimistic. Speaking at a forum in San Francisco in November, he said "Paris is getting people mobilized." And at a small theater in Paris on Saturday night, on a panel with documentary director Charles Ferguson and conservationist Jane Goodall, Brown said, "It looks like ... we can get on top of this climate challenge, if we just keep going and step it up."

But Brown also acknowledges the limitations of his cause. He has called climate change the "existential threat" to humanity. He said at the Vatican this summer, "We don't even know how far we've gone, or if we've gone over the edge."

While more than half of Americans say they are at least "somewhat worried" about global warming, according to a poll by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication, only 16 percent say they are "very worried."

In an opinion piece for Reuters last weekend, another California politician, House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield, said Republicans "are listening to the American people, who largely do not support the president's regulatory agenda and who understand that there is a better way."

Orville Schell, who wrote a book about Brown in 1978 and remains in contact with him, said Brown's relentlessness on climate change exhibits "the classic '50s existential thinking."

"This gets into the whole 'What do you do as a human being?' he said. "We're all going to die. Do you just surrender in despair? No. ... You plug on. ... He's willing to look right down the barrel of the gun and say we're messing up the world, and he's not optimistic we're going to be able to control ourselves. But he's not going to give up."

Anthony Leiserowitz, director of the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication, has called climate change the “policy problem from hell” because, unlike a smothering layer of smog, the potential effects of global warming – flooded cities, parched farmland, mass migration – can seem far off.

To draw attention to the issue, Brown has sought to capitalize on public interest in a group of politicians who largely reject mainstream climate science: the Republican candidates for president. In September, after the retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson said there was no overwhelming evidence that people cause global warming, Brown sent Carson a flash drive containing a United Nations report on the subject – then alerted the media.

Bill Whalen, a research fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution and former speechwriter for Gov. Pete Wilson, said of Brown’s efforts on climate change, “He’s just embraced it and run with it like a fiend.”

The environmental movement that Brown aligned himself with when he was governor before, from 1975 to 1983, was seemingly more straightforward. Long before the U.N.’s International Governmental Panel on Climate Change issued its first report on global warming – and decades before the emissions-limiting Kyoto Protocol was signed – Brown embraced environmentalists’ focus on near-term concerns about conservation, wilderness preservation and pollution.

In the 1970s, Brown lectured oil company executives on their “distressingly slow” reaction to smog. He dispatched aides to Detroit and Washington to lobby for stricter automobile emission standards and he rebuked the Carter administration for power plant regulations Brown said were too lenient.

“He was very concerned with putting a light footprint on the planet,” said former Gov. Gray Davis, Brown’s chief of staff when he was governor before.

Assessing Brown in 1992, in his third and final failed bid for president, the League of Conservation Voters said Brown “was at or near the cutting edge of many crucial environmental issues.” The assessment was an upgrade from an earlier report in which the league said Brown had “difficulty translating general concepts into specific programs.”

By the time Brown returned to the governor’s office, in 2011, California’s relatively aggressive climate change programs largely were in place. Davis signed tailpipe emission standards that became a national model, and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican, signed California’s landmark greenhouse gas reduction law, Assembly Bill 32.

Initially, Brown was so consumed by a multibillion dollar state budget deficit that he rarely left the state.

It was Brown’s shedding of that deficit, not any environmental work, that ultimately gave his climate diplomacy life. Following an economic recovery and a balancing of the state budget, California’s credit

rating – and its reputation – improved. Brown traveled to China, Mexico, Canada and Vatican City, holding California out as an example of a state that enacted some of the world’s most stringent emissions standards – and whose economy had not collapsed.

His argument was a counterpoint to the position of many conservatives who say strict environmental regulations hinder economic growth.

“We can show that it can be done,” said Robert Weisenmiller, chairman of the California Energy Commission, “that you can have both a vibrant economy and a sustainable energy system.”

This year, Brown began lobbying leaders of other jurisdictions to sign a voluntary agreement committing to efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to at least 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050. As of November, 57 jurisdictions from 19 countries had signed or endorsed the agreement. Brown’s office said their combined gross domestic products exceed that of the United States.

Brown’s signings of these agreements became so prolific that “if you sat over at the Governor’s Office, you would see a trickle, if not a stream, of people coming in from other states and signing agreements and then leaving,” said Tom Hayden, the former California state lawmaker who was Brown’s solar energy council chairman in the 1970s.

Brown’s environmental agenda suffered a rare defeat this year, when moderate Democrats in the state Assembly, amid intense lobbying from California’s oil industry, forced the administration to abandon a proposal to reduce petroleum use in cars by 50 percent.

The governor pledged to use his administrative authority to push forward with greenhouse gas reduction policies on his own, and he said “the only thing different is, my zeal has been intensified to a maximum degree.”

Brown faces persistent criticism from environmentalists for his refusal to ban hydraulic fracturing, a controversial form of oil extraction, and for his efforts to accelerate permitting of some drilling operations. Activists in Paris scheduled a screening Saturday of “Dear Governor Brown,” an anti-hydraulic fracturing film.

Brown has said it would be wrong for California, whose motorists are heavy consumers of gasoline, to foist the pollution caused by local oil drilling on other oil-producing states and countries.

R. Rex Parris, the Republican mayor of Lancaster who led an expansion of solar energy infrastructure in his city, is among lawyers representing farmers who accuse Brown of failing to protect state aquifers from drilling operations.

“Brown was somewhat of a hero to me until I got into this case,” Parris said. “Yeah, he’s an environmentalist, as long as it’s not oil.”

However, of the governor’s broader agenda, Parris said, “I think Brown is correct. We are talking about the extinction of the species. ... There is not any doubt in my mind that if we continue down the course we’re going, my grandchildren – and there’s five of them – will not have a normal lifespan.”

While talks in Paris are not likely to result in a binding treaty, an agreement on even intermediate steps will be a “huge accomplishment,” said David Victor, a professor of international relations at the University of California, San Diego, and author of the book “Global Warming Gridlock.”

“Pretending that 2 degrees is feasible, or that these actions will stop warming at 2 degrees is ... wildly inconsistent with reality,” Victor said.

But he said the Paris talks represent “an important milestone” in international efforts to counteract climate change.

“What I really like about the initiative from Gov. Brown is that he and others ... who are out doing stuff, they’re going to be in Paris saying, ‘Here’s what we’re actually doing, and here are concrete steps that you can take to start to move the needle.’ ”

Hayden, while acknowledging “the odds are that things are going to worsen” with climate change, said there is reason for hope.

“The climate crisis can generate terrible consequences, but it can also generate a global counterattack, like the equivalent of a global war with individuals playing their part,” he said.

Hayden had recently been speaking with his wife about Albert Camus’ Sisyphus and the philosophy of the absurd.

“He pushes the rock up the hill, pushes the rock up the hill and he pushes the rock, and it falls down to the bottom,” Hayden said. “My wife, Barbara, was thinking about that ... and she said, ‘The point of that is pushing the rock only makes you stronger.’ ”

“And I think that’s probably the way the governor is. Struggling against the absurd can actually make you wiser, make you stronger. Giving into the absurd? I don’t know where you spin off to.”

Brown, in an interview, said he finds the comparison “unsatisfying.”

“A lot of what we do does not appear particularly significant, and if you really rub your nose in that, it undermines your sense of well-being and, perhaps, the meaning of your life,” he said. “But if you’re doing things that have obvious importance and value, then that is in itself energizing and good. So I think working to mitigate disaster and clean up the air, that’s good work. That’s better than the opposite.”

Brown added, "Whether what we're doing is enough ... I would say, 'We live in ominous times.' "